

MY IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

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Lined up with my new classmates at the barre we stand in silence in first position, waiting for the music to begin. I catch a quick glance of myself in the mirror.

“Look at you!” I think to myself harshly, “you still don’t belong here even after all those years trying to fit into the ballet world.”

To my right stands 13-year-old Katie, shorter than me and thin as a stick. To my left is 12-year-old Stephanie with a normal body for her age and still not developed. As I look around the room it is the same: 14, 15 and 16-year-olds, all thin, all perfect ballet bodies and then me. Twenty-eight years old, slightly overweight and still trying to fit in where I don’t belong. The music starts and I temporarily forget the mirror, concentrating on the exercise. I bend into a plié but I can’t forget my body totally. I feel my knees ache as they strain under the weight of my body and the tips of my fingers tingle as I stretch out my arm. It is a good kind of ache as I put my body through the barre exercises, the kind that makes me feel good about exercising.

“Come on girls, you are dancers so please look like dancers,” the teacher instructs as we move into second position as a synchronised group. ‘Look like dancers.’ The phrase repeats in my head as I again gaze into the mirror and see myself as anything but.

I have always thought of myself as different. Different in the sense that while growing up I never, in my mind, seemed to fit into what society deemed ‘normal’. For me this society was Southern California, home to movie stars and the latest fashion trends; the so-called ‘beautiful people’. In the 1980s and 1990s, this society demanded a certain look that was anything but normal, and growing up in this shadow of influence, if you did not fit in – you knew it. It is still much the same today. Anywhere you go, advertisements and media coverage about beauty, diet and how to live bombard you. People who stand out are often targeted and made fun of for being and looking different from the ideal.

During my early years and even before I was born, my grandmother had small parts in movies, acted in the regional theatre and did some modelling. My aunt too was a fashion model and did some commercial work in television. They both were heavily influenced by the Hollywood image of thin, beautiful bodies. I remember how both my grandmother and my aunt looked during their moment in the spotlight – thin. My aunt was always so thin you could see her bones. This fascinated me for some strange reason. Yet the terms anorexia or bulimia were never discussed. She was never thought of as too thin, from what I heard. Beauty and thinness were held over my head like a prize, a symbol of success in a hard town like Los Angeles. The message I got was, ‘achieve success in the movies, television or media and your troubles will be taken care of’. The only problem was that in order to do that you had to fit their image.

As a child, I thought everyone in my family looked ‘normal sized’ except me. From the moment I could understand words, I was judged as being too pudgy or chubby. My family would comment that I had the body structure of my father who

was solidly built and a bit overweight. I never really saw him to compare myself with. He left our family when I was six years old and we never saw him again. Thus, in my mind, I was already being told that I didn't fit in. Anything that was associated with my father was thought of as bad, so being linked with him through blood was bad enough. Now I was told I resembled him in body structure as well. As I got older, this comparison made me hate my body even more. In my mind – I didn't fit in.

As a young child of four or five, I could not comprehend why people were making such a big deal over something like weight. I didn't know there was a standard to achieve. I do remember having a problem with food at around age six. Even then my favourite cookies and lollies were becoming the enemy. My mom remembers that she had to padlock the refrigerator door in order to stop me from sneaking food. I didn't understand why.

In order to try and combat this problem my mom enrolled me in various activities such as karate, swimming and ballet. Ballet was the one I liked the most, it was like a fairy tale. I do not remember much from my first ballet class but I do remember that at the end of class, the teacher put on the famous waltz music from the Sleeping Beauty ballet and we would dance across the floor. I loved that part, because we got to dance to the music that the big ballerinas danced to. Even when I got older in ballet, I always loved classical music from the famous ballets. It made me feel like a real ballerina and oh how I longed to dance those ballets on stage. At six years of age, however, all I saw was the pretty frilly costume and the idea of looking like a princess. The ballerina could have been ugly; I didn't care. Even though I liked the image of the ballerina with her special shoes and pretty dress, I didn't like the structure so I ended up dropping out of ballet after only one year.



Photo 1: My first ballet recital



Photo 2: Ready to go to class

When I was 12, I tried ballet again with a friend at the home of what would become the Los Angeles Classical Ballet Company. I felt proud to be going to a

school used by professional ballerinas. Pictures of professional company members lined the walls and, yet again, the image of the graceful ballerina in her pretty costume and special shoes was what caught my eye. On the first day, as we revealed our leotards, stripping off our street clothes, I noticed one fundamental difference in my appearance from my friend's. She was skinny and hadn't developed her chest like I had started to. She didn't have a tummy and a solidly packed middle like me either. I wanted to hide myself but I couldn't, I could only hope that she wouldn't say anything to our classmates at school about how I looked because I thought I looked different, not skinny like everyone else.

It was about this time in my life that the word 'diet' became a regular part of my vocabulary, not because I chose it but because it was forced upon me. My family members never tired of telling me that I could lose a few pounds or that those clothes didn't suit my frame. I was one of those people for whom diets didn't seem to work, mainly because I didn't stick to them. Besides, I didn't really want to diet anyway. I wanted to fit in, because being overweight would cause me to stand out and I feared I would be made fun of.

I decided to try ballet again at 14, this time, I threw myself headlong into learning everything I could. When I wasn't at the studio, I did class on my own, following along to a videotape on ballet technique. Every day I danced in my mother's bedroom after school as it was the largest and had a television. I read dance technique books, dance autobiographies, dance magazines and collected any books on ballet or its dancers I could find. I watched videos of ballets over and over, memorizing famous ballet combinations. I made myself a tutu out of scraps of netting and tulle – it wasn't pretty but in my mind it made me more like a ballerina. Wearing my makeshift tutu and listening to the music from famous ballets, I would spend all my spare time dancing for myself behind the closed doors of the bedroom. I even practised ballerina habits. For example, in order to protect their feet, professional dancers won't wear open toed shoes and, therefore, I wouldn't wear open toed shoes either. At school or away from the studio, I would practise my 'dancer walk', toes first instead of heels, my arms soft, and my regal 'dancer look' with head up and back straight. I started turning myself into my image of a ballerina.

That summer, my teacher decided that if I was this serious about my dancing I should join the advanced class. Besides, there was really no other class for me to go to given my age. So jumping for joy inside and after only about nine months of being back in ballet class, I stepped into my new class and never looked back. The new advanced class members were all younger than me, as was typical. I was used to it by now, for it seemed that anything I did, that I was always the oldest. Being younger than me and some a lot thinner, they hadn't developed womanly curves like I had. This played great tricks with my mind. I still didn't look at myself in the mirror but rather at the other dancers, constantly comparing myself to them. In the quest to look as thin as I could I would sometimes wear double leotards to squash down everything that would bulge out, mostly my breasts. In class I would keep long t-shirts, leg warmers or skirts on until the last possible moment when the teacher said I had to remove them in order to see proper technique. I hated looking in the mirror, I hated looking at myself and when I would it was to only see flaws and to compare myself to others.

The advanced class was taught by the director of the studio, a wonderful lady named Nancy who took me in and accepted me as part of her family. Nancy had not been a professional dancer but had been dancing all her life with studios and organizations across the United States. She embodied almost every aspect that

classifies my idea of a good teacher. She was caring and compassionate – the motherly type – very nurturing and supportive. I do not ever recalling her losing her temper, at least not openly in front of students. She had a passion for what she taught and strived to give everyone an appreciation and love of dance. She had a special gift at working with the three-year-olds and could capture their short attention spans. Then she could turn around and teach the teenagers without treating them the same as the babies. One of the things I remember most about her was her ballet fashion sense. She had every colour leotard imaginable and would wear combinations of a unitard (a leotard that has arms and legs) in one colour, over that a leotard in another colour and then a matching skirt. She always presented herself professionally, neat and tidy. When I started teaching I adopted her style and wore nearly the same thing. Some days we even matched. This, and the fact that I followed her every move in my teaching style, earned me the nickname ‘Nancy Junior’.

Permission to wear those magical pointe shoes was granted by Nancy who made a dancer pass through pretty tough criteria beforehand. Within two months of being in her class, she casually gave me a business card to the dance shop one day and said, “Go get your shoes”. I was elated. Those shoes were something I had been working towards and had wanted since starting ballet. Upon getting home from the shop, I unwrapped the pretty pink satin shoes from their box and put them on my bed. I looked at them, admired them, touched the satin and took in the new shoe smell. Carefully I measured out ribbon, cut it and threaded a needle. With care, I went through the ritual of sewing on my ribbons. Then, packing lamb’s wool around my toes, I slid them on. They needed breaking in. Up and down on my toes I went, trying to soften some of the stiffness in their arch. After about 20 minutes, I pulled my feet out of them and properly set them on my bed to dry before putting them away. My feet already ached and the skin was red around my toes from the pressure exerted on them but I didn’t mind. Pain was something I would have to get used to if I was to be a ballerina.

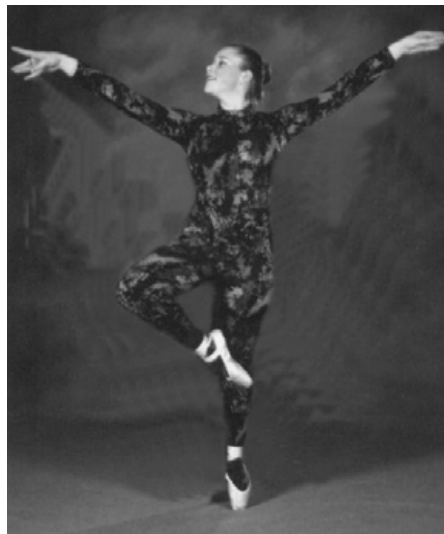


Photo 3: En pointe

This new status of dancing 'en pointe' also meant that I would be attending more than just one class a week. Soon I was doing up to seven or eight classes a week, plus dancing with the dance team that held rehearsals Saturday afternoons. In addition to that, anytime there was a master class taught by a well-known teacher at a local studio, I went to it. I was basically living at the studio from the time I got out of school at three until I went home at nine or ten at night, Monday through Thursday and then all day on Saturday too. This left little time for eating, which was fine with me, to get to my goal of looking like a dancer. At this studio we followed the Royal Academy of Dancing syllabus and had ballet exams at the end of every term, which I passed with flying colours. For me, dancing and choreography were easy. Any song I heard sent my mind into choreographic overload, making up steps to the music, something that I still do today. I picked up moves and memorized them instantaneously, I educated myself outside the studio and my whole world was dance.

The six members of my class would be together for the next five years. We were the advanced, older class. We had a reputation to uphold and I think we did it well. In all the productions and shows, we were the ones to have solo parts and multiple roles. Quickly I had gone from being part of the corps de ballet to being a prima ballerina, a role I loved. Nancy gradually let me take on more and more responsibility around the studio and even gave me a part time job working in the front office. I was quickly gaining the respect of my peers, fellow students and even the teachers. I tried to exude the attitude and practices of a professional dancer even down to how I prepared my pointe shoes. This, against Nancy's wishes, included smashing the toe box in the door jam and banging them against hard surfaces to break in, putting acrylic floor wax on them to harden them once they had broken down too much, stripping off the satin from the pointe so it isn't so slippery, dunking my foot in water and gluing my heel to the insole to make them fit tighter and, de-shanking (taking out the wood or plastic that serves as support in the arch while en pointe) pairs that were too worn down to do pointe work properly and wearing them for technique class instead of soft slippers. I also cut down the box and reconstructed the shoe to get more pointe and a better look of the foot. All these things Nancy frowned upon as she felt that a dancer should naturally work the shoes in order to make the foot stronger but I already had strong feet. In fact, given my size for a dancer, I was very strong which perhaps accounts for my quick rise to the top of my class.

Upon reflection, I can see that much of what Nancy said to me and allowed me to do was in fact to groom me for becoming an up-and-coming ballerina. Once, during a year-end performance, my pointe shoe ribbon came untied and unravelled while I was dancing on stage. I went on with the dance as if nothing was wrong and miraculously avoided tripping on it as it trailed behind me. Then when I came off-stage, Nancy pulled me aside and whispered that she was very disappointed to see that happen as it showed a lack of preparation and if I was in a larger company, I might be fired over it. Horrified and upset that I had disappointed her, in the next performance I made sure that my ribbon wouldn't come undone again by taping it around my ankle.



Photo 4: Balancing en pointe

My biggest obstacle in living my dream as a ballerina was going to be my weight. I had trouble just giving up food completely. I couldn't stick to a strict diet; there were too many sweet treats out there. Yet I was still big for a ballerina and I knew that I couldn't go far into the ballet world without being smaller. So I tried to develop the strict self-discipline needed to get me away from food. The more into my dance career I got, the more I went into a pattern of not eating meals. Typically, I would never eat breakfast. For lunch, I might have an apple, which eventually turned into having nothing for lunch. Then at dinner I would have second helpings and overeat because I was hungry. Of course, overeating by my dancer's standards meant having 7 crackers instead of 4 or a whole salad rather than half. I even tried special dancers' diets that I would read about from the professional dancers but it was too complicated to try and stick to them. Eventually I saw everything as having the potential to add on pounds. I did not want to eat in front of people and would find any excuse not to. I did not want them to force me to eat or question me with regards to why I wasn't eating. I didn't know what else to do except to not put the food in to begin with. However I felt that I didn't have *that* much self-discipline.

My rationale for not eating properly was to lose weight. Basically, trying to starve myself as that was the only way I knew to become thinner. My mom wasn't cooking regularly any longer for our family and it became even easier for me to walk away from food for a time. The food wasn't already prepared and readily available and I was either too tired or just didn't want to cook for myself most nights. I could fast and go nearly all day without eating anything because schoolwork and dance kept me busy. I was hungry but strong willed. I knew I couldn't give in. Some days this was ok but then other days, I would binge and eat all the wrong foods. Usually these were mostly junk foods like crackers, cookies and ice cream. Then I'd feel horrible about it afterwards. One solution I knew was to purge but it didn't work for me. The process of actually throwing up was unpleasant. Shoving my finger down my throat wasn't very appealing and I

couldn't get my stomach to actually contract enough to bring everything up. I tried but I couldn't bring myself to throw up.

My mom, especially, knew something was wrong but I denied it saying that I just wasn't feeling good or had a headache and therefore couldn't go to dinner. I started noticing weakness, light-headedness, fatigue and irritability. Several times I became so light-headed I fainted and collapsed but I made everyone think that I was sick with an illness. I missed a lot of school because I was so tired I couldn't get up in the morning. Amazingly though, I always found my strength for dance class.

I took health classes at school as well as had some medical knowledge about the body and I knew what anorexia was but I couldn't stop myself. I knew this was the wrong way to go about dieting. I couldn't find the answer to losing the weight to become a thin dancer. I was torn between my consciousness telling me that I was a bad person for doing this to myself, and my will at wanting so much to become a ballerina. To me, I wasn't a successful anorexic in doing away completely with food, because I hadn't become skin and bones. I felt a failure at not being able to become thin.

Part of the reason I feel that I didn't fall completely into an anorexic condition was due to Nancy. Nancy did not approve of the extremely thin ballerina look and would tell dancers she thought to be too thin that they need to gain weight. This is a reason no pictures of professional dancers hung on the walls of her studio. There was no influence or pressure to conform to a thin image. While this was refreshing to hear, it didn't solve my problems with my image or make me feel any better about being a dancer with a larger body for dance because, outside the studio, I was hit with the thin image everyday. I hid my problem with my body image from Nancy but I think she knew, especially when I practically lived at the studio. However, due to Nancy being so accepting with my body and allowing me to climb to the status of prima ballerina at her studio, she gave me the confidence to think that I could go on with my dance career. Nancy never discussed my weight with me, even though she knew what the world of professional ballet was like and knew I wanted to be a part of that world. Rather, she encouraged me to the fullest to go for it.

I decided to try my hand at the big university/semi-professional classes. I had been accepted academically into the universities I applied for but I had to audition to get in to the dance departments. In the excitement leading up to my audition I had been putting more time into practicing my technique. Practicing at home was what I did whenever I was not at the studio. It was not uncommon for me to don my pointe shoes and put myself through class or practice choreography on any given afternoon. On one such afternoon something different happened. Walking across my make-believe stage on demi-pointe (on the balls of the feet), I suddenly heard the sound of material ripping and then I felt an intense sharp pain in my right heel. I stopped, felt my foot and limped it off. My shoes did not appear to be torn, so what could that have been? I tried to get through some more dance steps but my heel was cramping and sore by now. Obviously I had hurt my Achilles tendon but I didn't understand how. Days later in class I noticed I couldn't relevé to demi-pointe (rise up to the metatarsals) and once I got to full pointe my Achilles would start to pinch. It even hurt to just point my foot. My doctor concluded that I had strained my Achilles tendon and needed time off but that didn't stop me from working through the pain in class. Besides I had an audition to get to. I had no time to be injured.

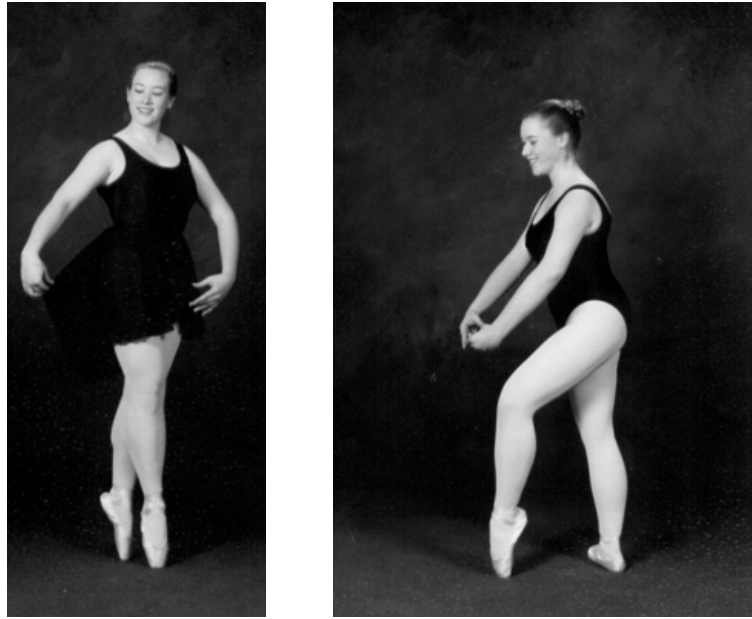


Photo 5 and Photo 6: Audition photos

It took 16-hours on the train to get to the university where I had hoped to study. The train didn't get into the city until 2:30 a.m. but that next morning I was up and dressed in my traditional leotard and tights and had to be at the dance department by 10. I was shown in to meet with the director, butterflies whirling about in my stomach. I told myself to "stay professional – don't let them see you nervous. Act cool." But I was so excited. The woman director had once been a professional dancer herself as evident by the photos on the wall. She was now in her 60s, still petite but very stern looking. She called me into her office and gave me the once over look, up and down, without an expression on her face. I had my street clothes on over my dance clothes so it was a little hard to tell just what she was scrutinizing me for. We talked a little about my training and she went over the criteria of the dance majors at the university. Then she asked to see my photos and videotape. The audition at this dance department required at least two photos in basic ballet poses and a videotape of your technique in class. I handed both to her and waited. The video she would watch while I attended class. The photos she looked at carefully and then put them on her desk without saying a word, her face still expressionless. Perhaps this was just her nature except, to a nervous 18-year-old full of hopes, she seemed rather disagreeable. I had the feeling that she didn't think I was right to be a ballet dancer and had already made up her mind. In my mind I didn't fulfil the ballerina image but I knew I could dance well. I was top of my class at my local studio. Hopefully the director would see my dancing and not what I looked like in order to make her judgement. After the quick interview it was off to class. I was informed that I would attend a basic technique class without pointe. She introduced me to the teacher; a man in his 60s who looked as if he had never danced a step and who also didn't seem to have the most positive disposition. He wasn't even dressed in dance clothes but, rather, a shirt and pants. He reminded me slightly of Balanchine who dressed the same way with classes he

taught. He didn't say hello or even ask my name but waved me off to get to a place at the barre.

I undressed into my ballet clothes, quickly donned my pink leather slippers and found the only remaining spot – at a rarely used freestanding barre next to the rosin box containing the extremely sticky substance used by pointe dancers to prevent slippage. The class had already begun and the whole room stared at me as I took my place. A girl next to me smiled and then quickly faced forwards again as the pianist began the music and the teacher barked commands, his eyes missing nothing.

It was the same for every exercise – copy and compare myself to the other dancers. I couldn't even really show what I was capable of because I was trying so hard to keep up with the unfamiliar choreography. To make matters worse, despite the adrenaline rush, I hadn't slept in nearly two days and the university was set atop a hill overlooking the city. The altitude added to my tiredness and made me feel sluggish. Plus the flooring was covered in 'marley' – a sticky and non-slip polyurethane coating – much different from the smooth wood floors I was used to. My shoes picked up so much of the residue spilled from the rosin box that by the end of class I couldn't even get around smoothly in my turns.

I couldn't help but feel out of place; here were the thin, tall, long-legged ballerinas that epitomised the ballerina image, their hair neatly done up in buns, all wearing standard black leotards and pink tights, no fat deposits anywhere on their bodies. Then there was me – in the same dress except shorter and slightly rounded. I knew that I wasn't one of them.

I was relieved when class was finally over but left feeling defeated and unhappy. I knew I had blown my chance. Some of the girls asked me to stay on and join the pointe class that would start in 15 minutes. Knowing how I was on flat shoes I couldn't imagine the catastrophe awaiting me if I tried pointe. I smiled and thanked them noting that the director was waiting for me. They offered good luck. However, in my mind, I knew luck had gone out the door the minute I set foot in that studio. The director didn't say much except that she would have a chat with the teacher whose class I had just done and she would let me know in the next week. She handed back my tape and photos and showed me the door. Deep down inside I had the feeling that I would not be accepted into the programme. I hadn't performed as I was capable of doing. I even explained to her that I was capable of so much more but that I was just having an off day. That did not seem to matter to her as she gave me a curt 'thanks for coming' and returned to her office. I could not even enjoy the rest of the trip because all I wanted to do was go home and forget about the whole experience.

A week later, a letter from the dance department told me I was not accepted. That would have been enough except it went on to state that my technique was nowhere near up to their level and standards, I lacked the training needed, I didn't have the right physique for a dancer and that I needed to choose another career. I was crushed, upset and angry over how someone could decide just like that that I didn't belong in the dance world. On the other hand, I couldn't fully blame the director as, on that day, I wasn't anywhere near at the same level of technique as the other dancers. However, I did hope that the director would be lenient and realize all the other factors that had caused me not to be quite myself that day.

When I showed Nancy the letter, she too was upset, as it was a direct reflection on her teaching. She tried to be consoling, saying that there were other dance departments though I knew it would be the same. I never again auditioned for another dance department. It was just too painful. I had already been rejected

from several auditions for small regional dance companies and studios. Why would a big university dance company be any different?

When I first started ballet training seriously, ballet was my escape from life. I could dance as a princess or a young maiden searching for her true love or go any place the music inspired me to go. I danced for me, for my soul. Now it seemed that ballet had turned into a competition for who had the perfect body. I was always cognisant of my body when I danced now and thought that perhaps the audience would not see me as a dancer for, in my mind, I didn't think I looked like one. I tried to put the incident of the audition behind me. However, things kept coming back to haunt me, particularly the part about not looking like a dancer. It is something that has stuck in my mind ever since. Right after finding out the results of the audition, I went into a depressive state, upset that I couldn't be the one thing I wanted more than anything at the time to be – a ballerina. It still stings to think about it but as an 18-year-old, it was especially damaging.

I kept on with my dancing at my studio but it wasn't the same knowing that it would never lead me anywhere. I finally resigned myself to the fact that I would never be a professional dancer; I could only hope to remain the best here at my studio. Eventually, I ended up attending a local university majoring in movement and exercise science. Slowly, dance began to fade out of my life. My weight issue was never resolved, even when I was at my thinnest. Every audition outside my studio, even for minor roles, was the same. Furthermore, now I was injury prone. This chain of events, I believe, was a major catalyst for my fall into depression. While I still could run away to the studio and get lost in choreography, I struggled with having to see myself as a 'normal' person and not a dancer. My life was a mess and I felt as though I couldn't handle it anymore.

My last full year of dancing came to an abrupt halt when I was 21. With dropping enrolments, Nancy had to close the small dance studio that I had practically lived at and seen as my second home for the past eight years. No longer could I run away to the studio, put the music on and dance or sit in the middle of the wooden floor and dream. Now my once beloved satin shoes would decorate my wall rather than my feet. I could have gone on to another studio in another town or danced another dance style but I wanted to be a ballerina. I had fought so hard against the laws of nature preventing me from becoming a ballerina that I didn't have any fight left. At 22 years of age, I walked away from dance completely – it was just too painful to watch others do what I wanted to do.

I noticed a tremendous change in my body in the years that followed. The amenorrhea (lack of menstruation) that I had been experiencing since age 15 stopped and I began to become regulated. I also gained weight. Some of the affects that my dance and diet regime had on my body include chronic joint pain, loss of bone density, breakdown of the cartilage in between my bones leading to the need for knee surgery and herniated discs in my back, thinning of my hair, a torn Achilles tendon and a thyroid problem that went undiagnosed for years. All those injuries still haunt me to this day. I do not regret my journey into the ballet world. My quest for my impossible dream overshadowed many of the bodily sacrifices it took to try and get there and, while I did not dance professionally, at least I can say that I did dance.



Photo 7: A final bow

Class is ending as we take the final bow to the teacher in the *révérence*. As I look up, the mirror looms in front of me. “You may dress like a dancer but you’ll have to lose the fat in order to look like one,” my mind says as I turn away. I have done what I can in class but I do not move like I used to. I watch the other girls talk excitedly about upcoming ballet exams and remember when I too took them. I pull on my sweatshirt, hiding my body from others and myself and begin to untie my tattered pointe shoes. They look like I feel, tired and old.

“You must have danced,” a mother of one of the girls says to me. “I can tell. You’ve got good feet,” meaning that my technique still shows.

I smile and declare that I did, although it’s been a while.

“Well, you’ve got a lot of courage to jump back in and especially with these girls. I wouldn’t be caught dead in a leotard now,” she muses.

I smile again and laugh quietly to myself. It does take courage to dance alongside these young girls. If only I could convince myself that I do not need to compare my body with them. I still have to fight hard not to slip back into the mindset of an anorexic. It is a daily battle even now that some days I lose. In my heart I still want to dance. And next week, I’ll pull on my tights and leotard, don my pink slippers and put my battered body through the routines again just to prove to myself that I still can.

¹ This story is adapted from Waggoner, J. L. (2004). *What is the Pointe? An Exploration into the Ballerina Body Aesthetic*. Unpublished Masters thesis. The University of Waikato.

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